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ABSTRACT

This document includes a selection of materials from the National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA) on tracking and ability grouping designed to be a tool for teachers who wish to organize their school or district against tracking. The packet contains a cover letter, a response/feedback form, and reproductions of the following articles: (1) "What is Tracking?" (NCEA); (2) "Tracking: Maintaining Inequality" (NCEA); (3) "Selma High Student Speaks Out" (an interview with M. Sanders); (4) "My Tracking Experience" (C. Richard); (5) "The Pigs" (M. Schwabe); (6) "What's Wrong with Tracking" (S. Karp); and (7) "Tracking: An Old Solution Creates New Problems (a chapter from "Making the Best of Schools" by J. Oakes and M. Lipton). Also included is a list of 11 resources on tracking. (JB)

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Maintaining Inequality

A BACKGROUND PACKET ON TRACKING & ABILITY GROUPING

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Dear education activist:

This background packet on tracking was designed as an organizing tool. We hope that after reading it and learning about tracking in your own schools, you'll take some action.

If we can help with additional materials, speakers, trainers, or other resources, please let us know. We are also prepared to help you plan forums, discussions, or other programs.

Here are some organizing ideas to consider: find out about tracking in your schools; hold a discussion and develop a plan; present a resolution (perhaps the NCEA action paper) to your PTA, instructional council, board of education or other body; ask school board candidates to read the action paper and commit themselves to de-tracking; organize a public debate.

With one exception, we encourage you to copy and distribute this packet widely. The exception is the article called, "An Old Solution Creates New Problems." It is reprinted with special permission from Yale University, and we must pay $1 for each copy made.

This packet and the action paper in it are not set in stone. As we receive your feedback and reports, we'll revise and develop the materials. To make it easier, we have included a response form.

Please feel free to write a letter or call instead of using the form. We want to hear from you about the negative effects of tracking in your schools and about your efforts to reduce and eliminate those effects.

If there is interest, we may expand the packet into a manual on how to organize to improve schools and end tracking.

For help revising the action paper or other assistance contact Debi Duke at 914-658-8115.

Thanks and good luck.

Sincerely,

Linda Christensen, Jonnie Taylor, and Benson Webb
NCEA Tracking Work Group

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WHAT DID YOU THINK?

With your help, we can make "Maintaining Inequality: A Background Packet on Tracking and Ability Grouping" more useful. Please answer the following questions and return this sheet, or call and tell us what you think.

1. Did the packet help you understand tracking and the problems it can cause for students?

2. Will you share the packet or parts of it with other parents or teachers?

If not, what would make it more suitable for sharing?

3. Are you planning to take any action on tracking?

If yes, what?

4. Is there any information or kind of material you'd like to see added to the packet?

5. Is there anything in the packet that wasn't useful?

6. Do you think NCEA should produce similar packets on other topics?

If yes, what subjects would you like to see covered?

Name _____

Address _____

Phone number_____

Please check all that apply.

___ Parent ___ Teacher ___ Other (Pls describe)

Please feel free to use the back of this sheet for other comments and suggestions. Thanks!

What Is Tracking?

Tracking is a way of sorting students. Sorting determines the kinds of skills, knowledge, and resources available to students. Although tracking is often known as ability grouping, it has very little to do with ability.

Rather, tracking is usually based on achievement as measured by standardized tests or estimates of a child's ability. Even when tracking is based on the judgement of teachers, students, and/or parents, it rarely accounts for differences in family education or circumstances, past school experiences, and other factors. It fails to fully consider each student's strengths, weaknesses, and potential.

The result is an education system that duplicates inequalities among races, classes, and sexes that continue to tear our society apart. The most vicious forms of tracking close off opportunities for certain students, most often the poor and children of color. These students end up spending years repeating mindless drills in English, math, and other so-called basic classes.

What are the most common tracking methods?

Teachers and parents sometimes believe tracking is beneficial because it seems to respect differences among students. However, in the long run tracking is harmful — once a child is in a low track it is almost impossible to get out. Every day children spend in the low track they lose ground to students in more advanced groups.

Every school tracks differently. This paper presents a list of the most common forms of tracking with the technical name and an explanation of how it works. Since these practices can be hard to spot and some schools will deny using them, the explanations are followed by a list of questions to help you decide if negative forms of tracking are being used.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

ABILITY GROUPING:

- **Within grade level.** Some schools deliberately — through the use of test scores — or through carelessness create tracked classes within grades. For instance, instead of mixing all children in three second grade classes, the better prepared students end up together.

If your child seems to be with the same children year after year, or if the classes seem to be segregated by race, neighborhood, or the parents' background, you may want to ask questions. (For ideas, see the list at the end of this sheet.)

- **Within classes.** Especially in reading and math, students may be divided into groups. Often the groups have names like tigers, panthers, and bluebirds instead of high, middle, or low. Materials are usually different for each group and while advanced groups get whole books, the lower groups may get work sheets.

ACTION:

If your child is in a lower-level group, insist that there be a plan and a target date for moving him or her into a higher level. Find out what you can do at home to help improve your child's skills and speed up the process.

Question tracking at PTA and other parent meetings. Even though you may be able to protect your child, others will be harmed if the practices continue. If you are able to convince other parents that tracking is harmful, work together to get your school or the entire system to adopt a plan to end tracking. Contact NCEA for organizing ideas.

PULL-OUT PROGRAMS

Many students are taken out of class for special help as part of Chapter 1, special education, or some other program. Students in pull-outs are often labeled in negative ways. If the program's benefits truly outweigh this risk, parents and teachers should try to make sure the students do not see pull-outs as negative.

Students should be evaluated before they are placed in pull-outs and clear, short-term goals should be set. At the end of an agreed-upon period, the program should be evaluated to see if the child's needs are being met and progress is being made.

ACTION:

Encourage the school to use Chapter 1 funds in such a way that extra help is provided in the classroom. Fight for lower class sizes so teachers have time to work with every student.

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

ABILITY GROUPING:

Tracking that began in elementary school is often continued in middle and high schools. Many schools use test scores and teacher recommendations to place students in classes or sections of classes.

Even if your school does not automatically group students by "ability," you may want to watch out for the following tracking methods:

- **Class names.** "General," "Developmental," "Basic," and "Beginning" in course titles often mean lower track. Other times a class will have sections A, B, and C with the letters standing for the level of difficulty. Section A may be the only one that prepares students to take later classes needed for college.

Some classes are known as "gatekeepers" or "prerequisites." They may be required before a student is permitted to take some other class. For instance, a student who wants to take geometry may need to take algebra first. Occasionally schools will offer certain gatekeepers only in the summer or will charge a fee; this is probably illegal and you should complain loudly.

- **Electives.** Once a student has signed up for required courses he or she can usually choose two or three more classes known as "electives." Sometimes students choose their own electives, other times they are advised by counselors.

Foreign languages, journalism, photography, music performance, and similar classes are more likely to encourage critical thinking and other higher-level skills than wood shop, basic/general music, or introductory art. The first group of classes are also more likely to be filled with enthusiastic students who may encourage others to raise their expectations.

ACTION:

See action item under "Steering" below.

STEERING:

Counselors or other school staff may discourage students from taking the most challenging courses. Sometimes they will say the student is not prepared or will not benefit from the class because they are not going to college.

ACTION:

If the school has a list or catalogue of classes, look it over with your child. Talk with your child about what he or she would like to take and what recommendations, if any, the school counselor has made.

Make sure your child is not being kept out of certain classes because of test scores or recommendations. If you are told he or she is not prepared for a certain class, find out how to get prepared. If necessary, especially if the course is a "gatekeeper," insist that the school provide extra help.

Demand that your child get a strong background in English and math; that means classes that prepare them for college even if they're not sure they want to go. Don't accept excuses about scheduling problems from school staff.

What does tracking look like?

You may not immediately recognize the practices described above or your school system may claim that it does not use tracking. However, if you answer "no" to any of the questions below, you may want to talk with other parents about your concerns and investigate further.

1. Do most classes have a racial and ethnic mix similar to the school as a whole? For instance, if the school is 2/3 black and 1/3 white, are most of the classes the same or are some 90 percent black and others 90 percent white?

2. Do most classes have roughly equal numbers of boys and girls?

3. Do students in most classes have backgrounds similar to those found in the school as a whole? For example, do there seem to be classes where most students' parents are professionals and others where most students come from poor or working class families?

4. Can you see that your children are progressing? Grades may not be the best indicator; notice whether children are reading and writing more or better, moving beyond basic math skills, expressing more complicated ideas, taking on more responsibility, developing skills or talents, and so on.

5. Do your children's teachers seem to know your children's weaknesses and strengths and have a plan for addressing them?

6. When you attend school programs or extra-curricular activities, do the participating students seem to reflect the racial, ethnic, and class mix found in the school as a whole?

7. If your school or school system has special programs or schools, do the students who are part of them seem to reflect the mix found in the school or system as a whole?

8. What kinds of homework do your children have? Ask questions if they:

- Have no homework
- Get many work sheet drills
- Are reading and answering questions on paragraphs instead of whole stories and books
- Have lots of multiple choice questions rather than thoughtful writing assignments.

For more information, or help in proposing tracking changes in your schools, contact NCEA, PO Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472 or call 914-658-8115.

"Maintaining Inequality: A Background Packet on Tracking and Ability Grouping," published by the National Coalition of Education Activists, P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472

Tracking: Maintaining Inequality

Tracking duplicates inequalities of race, class, and sex that exist throughout our society. In doing so it undermines the most basic goal of public education: to help all students reach their potential and prepare them for life as citizens in a democracy.

Tracking assumes students come with fixed academic abilities that don't change. Most research, however, supports the idea that academic ability develops and is shaped by expectations and community standards.

Tracking does not raise students' or parents' expectations. It does not encourage effort. It is not designed to help students progress. Tracking does, however, pigeonhole students, without developing a plan for moving them forward.

Tracking results in labeling that also has negative effects. As many have observed, there is hardly anyone who isn't bright enough to understand they aren't considered very bright. For students in lower tracks, these labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tracking's advocates say grouping permits teachers to give more attention to individual students' needs, allowing "high" achievers to progress more quickly and "low" achievers to set and meet reasonable goals. However, most studies suggest that when tracked classes do provide more individual attention it is because classes are smaller and teachers are using a wider variety of strategies, not because the students are at similar "levels."

There is little proof that tracking benefits students. There is much evidence that students in higher tracks receive certain advantages that should be available to all students, including:

- Highly qualified, experienced teachers.
- Additional resources.
- Access to higher-level skills such as critical thinking, and more intensive writing assignments.
- Exposure to a wider variety of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and lively discussions.
- Constructive, personal criticism as opposed to harsher correction in front of other students.
- Access to specialized knowledge such as higher mathematics and sciences.
- Active support from parent groups.

The result of providing these advantages to students who are, in many cases, white, middle class, and already privileged just widens gaps in achievement, knowledge, and skills. Tracking creates classes teachers don't want to teach and tends to segregate students based on race and class.

Where do we go from here?

Short-term, skill-specific grouping focused on reducing differences helps ensure that students can take advantage of the kinds of knowledge and skills that in tracked systems are only available at higher levels; there is a place for this kind of grouping.

Practices that label students, encourage low expectations, or restrict access to knowledge, resources, or skills should stop.

Ending tracking without making other changes will yield few results. Therefore, our recommendations are designed to be implemented over time and to create schools where all students are well-served, where diversity is seen as an opportunity rather than a liability, and students are not isolated or segregated, deliberately or otherwise, by race, class, language, past achievement, or other factors.

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Recognizing that effective ways to end tracking will vary from school to school, NCEA recommends that school systems take the following general steps:

- **Examine and publicize tracking practices in use.**
- **Encourage discussion about tracking** among students, parents, staff, administrators, and boards of education.
- **Develop a time line for phasing out tracking.**
- **Provide teachers with training** in strategies and techniques suited to working with mixed classes, for example, cooperative learning, functioning as a resource and conductor rather than a lecturer, active learning, team and peer teaching.
- **Develop alternatives to standardized tests** for evaluating and promoting students. In particular, test scores should not be compared across schools and younger children should receive developmental reports rather than grades.
- **Explore alternatives to non-promotion** such as multi-age grouping and competency-based curricula.
- **Create a school culture with high expectations for *all* students.** Specifically, ensure that all children acquire knowledge and skills needed to have a real choice between immediate employment, higher education, or some combination.
- **Develop a plan to reduce class sizes.**
- **Involve all members of the school community** — students, parents, support staff, and faculty, as well as administrators — in planning and making changes.
- **Rework curriculum to emphasize themes and ideas** rather than skills and sequences. Challenging, meaningful curriculum is more likely to motivate students to learn skills that will help them gain information, understand ideas, and solve problems.
- **Ensure that "basic skills" include reasoning and analysis, problem-solving, creative and critical thinking** — skills needed for full participation in a democracy.
- **Make sure all students have equal access** to knowledge and resources. In high schools, for instance, this might mean abolishing "basic" courses that do not qualify students for other classes or for college-level work.

(This does not necessarily mean eliminating honors sections. It does mean ensuring that all students, not just those in academic tracks, have the possibility of entering honors programs.)

NCEA also recommends the following steps to limit the negative effects of tracking during the phase-out period:

- **Design courses or tutorials to help secondary students** move into higher tracks.
- **Regularly review the progress of all students in lower tracks** with the goal of moving them to another track for at least part of each day.
- **Provide extra support for students with a history of low achievement.**
- **Train counsellors to be aware of subtle and not-so-subtle tracking practices** and prepare them to help students move out of lower tracks.
- **Establish written criteria** and have a method of accountability, including an appeal process, for any tracking that is not immediately phased out.

For more information, or help in proposing tracking changes in your schools, contact NCEA, Post Office Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472 or call 914-658-8115.

Mainta[illegible] Inequality: A Background Packet on Tracking and Ability Grouping, published by the National Coalition of Education Activists, P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472

Selma High Student Speaks Out

Malika Sanders, a sixteen year old junior at Selma High, has taken an active role in the struggle for equity in the Selma Public Schools. She and several other students have recently formed an organization called SMART (Students Marching Against Racial Tracking). In the following interview, Malika reflects on her experiences as a student and activist.

Rethinking Schools: *What do you and other Selma High students think of the tracking system.*

Malika: Actually we don't call it tracking. Most people call it leveling and that's exactly what it does — it levels a student's spirit. The teachers pick who they want to be in Level 1. The few black students who are in Level 1 are usually middle class.

I think a lot of Level 1 students are beginning to understand that everyone should get a chance to take Level 1 courses. In Levels 2 and 3 they don't give you college preparatory courses, they just give you the basics.

At this point, it might be kind of hard to get a lot of Level 2 and Level 3 students to take level 1 courses, because all our lives we've heard that Level 1 courses are so hard, and that they're just for the smart people. Therefore the Level system has leveled the confidence of the students. But it's not true that they can't do the work. I've taken some Level 1 courses, and I can tell you that they are not that hard. Everyone should have a choice whether they want to take these courses or not.

Rethinking Schools: *How has this system affected students you know?*

Malika: I have a friend who is now a student at Stillman College. She was a victim of the leveling system. They put her in Level 2 and 3 courses. Because of that she could not pass some courses in college. No counselor or teacher ever told her that to make it in college you need to take some Level 1 courses.

Another friend of mine was put into Level 3 when he moved to Selma. Even though he made all A's in Level 3 they didn't even consider moving him up. His mom had to fight for months to get him into Level 1. They told his family he shouldn't be in Level 1 because he wouldn't be able to do the work. But when he finally got into Level 1 he did very well — A's and B's.

Rethinking Schools: *Describe for us the role students have played in the Selma struggle.*

Malika: At the start we just marched with the parents. When the protests then were called off, we felt we hadn't accomplished enough. We were upset almost to the point of tears. We decided it was time for the students to pick up where the adults left off so we organized a march called "A Walk for a Dream." During the march we carried a casket which had a banner around it which said, "Please Don't Bury Our Dreams." We asked the school board, the mayor, everybody who had power not to bury the dreams of the youth. We asked them instead to bury drugs and teen pregnancy and the type of things that were destructive to young people.

Rethinking Schools: *How did the sit -in at the high school come about?*

Malika: Before the sit-in the spirit of the youth had started to die down. When we went into this thing, we thought that because our cause was just everything would come "in time." But we didn't understand that "in time" could mean years. So we decided to organize a student sit-in at our high school. On a Thursday we marched to Selma High School. We ended up running so we could get through the doors before they could lock them. When we got in the building, parents and people from the community brought us food; they were really supportive. College students from Tuskegee and Stillman came to take part in our sit-in and they're still here today. We were in the building for four days and five nights.

Rethinking Schools: *What happened after the sit-in?*

Malika: When we got back to school, we wore stickers which said, "No peace for racists." Our principal and our superintendent tried to make us take them off because they said we were offending the white people. But our position was if they weren't racists why should it offend them? But they still made us take them off. We took these stickers off in the cafeteria and started chanting "Fired up!" and singing movement songs; so they came and suspended us, and we ended up going to an alternative school for four days.

Rethinking Schools: *How have these recent events affected you and your friends?*

Malika: Because of how active I've been the atmosphere between me and my teachers is very tense. They basically don't let us talk about these types of things in class. I never used to be sent to the office, but now it has become my second home. I really have a hard time when I go to school. I feel like I'm in prison, like the walls are closing in on me.

I have learned to stand strong in whatever I believe in. I knew this before but it's different to be actually doing it day after day, to the point where I barely eat or sleep.

Because of being suspended a lot of students are scared to take part. But I think the commemoration this weekend (Editor's note: the 25th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march) will build the spirit of our youth again. We have all types of leaders here who will give us the strength to go on. I think the students will decide to take a stronger stand again because they can't help but see the injustices that go on in Selma, and they can't help but see the strength of our leaders who are here with us. I think this will uplift the students and make us go forward and make justice come to Selma, Alabama.

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My Tracking Experience

by Christen Richard

On my first day of high school, my English teacher greeted us with a test. "Class, we are going to take a test to see if you should remain in this class. If you test low, we'll move you down to the intermediate level, English B. You may start."

I opened up to what you might call a book of riddles: "Blue is to sky as _____ is to _____." The words seemed foreign to me, words I couldn't pronounce, words that didn't carry any meaning for me. They challenged my ability to comprehend a sentence.

After searching to find a prefix or suffix I learned in middle school, I dropped my number two pencil in disgust. Unfortunately, the war wasn't over.

"In the next section, you must find the errors in these sentences."

The next day I entered my classroom at 8:25 and waited for the tardy bell to ring so I would know if I belonged in English A. "Jerry Maze, Rhoda Peterson . . . Christen Richard . . . ." I hadn't passed the test. I had failed.

But don't think I left it at that. I ignored the teacher's idiotic speech and started planning. I made an appointment to see my counselor.

As I walked down the hall, I felt the walls were trying to close in on me. I knew the odds were against me. I was only a freshman. What could I do? I felt like an outcast, a piece that didn't fit part of the puzzle. But whether I belonged or not, I was determined to carve my way to fit.

I made it through freshman English A and came out with a "C" grade. I really don't know my teacher's feelings about me staying in her class, and to be frank with you, I don't care. She never spoke to me much at all.

But my battle didn't end. When I returned at the beginning of my sophomore year, I discovered I was once again in English B. I was devastated.

I knew I shouldn't be in this intermediate class. I never had any homework. I finished it during class in about 15 minutes. The assignments were ridiculous. "Class," my teacher would say, "I'm going to give you the word 'Christmas.' I want you to find as many words as you can in 20 minutes." I was going off my rocker in two weeks.

I pleaded with the head of the English department, telling her why I wanted to leave my class. "The work is too easy. I'm not learning anything by finding words out of other words, and I'm tired of it." She knew what I was talking about. Then came the test. As mad as I was I think I could have passed the SAT. Should a multiple-choice test determine what I know? Should it determine what I want to learn?

"You were low on the multiple-choice section, but high on your essay skills. I don't know if I should let you go to advanced placement, but I'm going to let you try. I want you to do your best, and show me that you belong in an advanced class."

I felt like a winner. I got up out of my seat and shook her hand. I said, "Thank you very much." I left with my head up and ten pounds more of pride.

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Garbage Patrol

by Lisa Clay

I was walking on a middle school playground. The kids were dropping candy wrappers and other garbage. I said to them, "Hey! Don't litter the playground." They said, "Don't worry. The special ed kids will pick it up."

This school actually had certain kids picking up garbage on a regular basis as part of the school program. And, it had other kids who thought themselves superior. When I complained, school officials told me the special ed kids would be doing these types of jobs, that it was good training.

Reprinted with permission. *The Portland (OR) Alliance*, June 1991

The Pigs

By Molly Schwabe

"How was school, honey? Do you like your teacher? What are you learning?" I asked.

"School's fine. I like it. My teacher's nice," Katie beamed in reply.

I was so happy about Katie's attitude. Proud and expectant, knowing what a little wizard I had created, I waited anxiously for the school's affirmation. I imagined the first conference and how I would lower my head and modestly thank them for the compliments. Certainly they would soon discover the wonder of my pig-tailed six year old.

Certainly they would soon discover the wonder of my pig-tailed six year old.

Katie was a mimic—she could mime almost anything, from applying pretend mascara to reading with expression. I had read religiously to Katie, and she loved it. She had a ready repartee of Mother Goose rhymes and could do all sorts of adorable tricks. Reading would be a snap, I thought.

For the next few weeks Katie continued to come home content and positive as she could be. She bubbled when I asked about the reading groups.

"What reading group are you in?" I casually asked.

"The Pigs," Katie proudly answered.

I was absolutely stunned. "What? Are you sure?"

"Yes," she squealed with sheer delight, "I'm a Pig!"

"What are the other groups?" I inquired.

"Oh, let's see, the Lions, the Tigers, and the Panthers."

"There must be other groups." I prayed silently, "Oh please, God, please let there be others—Worms, Sloths, Slugs...something."

"No, that's all," she grinned, dashing my hopes.

Margot, one of Katie's friends, could rattle off the whole alphabet when she was only three, so I asked about Margot's group. Margot was a Panther. Christopher, whose parents both went "Back East" to school, was a Tiger.

"How about Darcy?" I asked. Darcy picked her nose, was rumored to have had head lice, and was very silly. Her mother never read to her, so I guessed she wouldn't be too successful in school.

Katie was jubilant. "Darcy's in my group. We're both Pigs!"

Then I was really sick. I asked about the readers. The Panthers and the Tigers were reading little stories. The Pigs were working on vowel sounds or letters. I started grabbing books off the shelves and asked Katie to read. She knew some of the words, others were total mysteries. To my surprise she couldn't, in fact, read as well as I had thought. Perhaps she wasn't a Panther; certainly, she was no Pig.

The Panthers and the Tigers were reading little stories. The Pigs were working on vowel sounds or letters.

The next afternoon I visited the teacher. "Katie is terribly bored," I lied. She's beginning to hate school because she is miserable in her reading group. She's a great reader and should be reading real stories. I want her moved right away!"

Naturally the teacher was confused and surprised, but agreed to give her a chance in a new group. That evening Katie and I began Distar lessons. I timed, while Katie struggled with "mit, bit, sit, kit," over and over. Under duress, she could spout "mat, cat, sat, pat, hat," in less than fifteen seconds.

Distar was discarded after a few evenings, but Katie remained in the top group. Eventually she was placed in the TAG Junior Great Book afterschool program, and today she's an avid reader. She's doing well in college and will be a junior at the University of Washington in the fall.

Downtown last weekend I ran into Darcy. She got her high school diploma only one year late and is hoping to land a practically permanent job in an all-night grocery. I often wonder what would have happened to Katie if I hadn't asked about the groups or had been too afraid to lie.

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What's Wrong With Tracking

By Stan Karp

The struggle of Selma's black parents and students against a blatantly discriminatory school system in a city with a legendary civil rights history naturally touches responsive chords in many people. (See companion article, *Selma Students Tied to Track* in this issue). But what really gives the current Selma campaign its significance isn't the echo of past battles or even the particularly glaring injustices of the Selma level system. What's most striking is that this grassroots mobilization is expressly challenging a tracking system that is not, fundamentally, very different from those found in school systems in every community in this country.

Tracking can be understood broadly as the classification of students and their placement in differentiated educational programs. It dates back to the early 1900s when it grew side by side with the expansion of public schooling, and it has increased steadily over the decades until today more than 80 per cent of all students are tracked in one way or another. In recent years new categories of special education, "remedial" programs and language groupings have fed the educational system's voracious appetite for sorting and labeling people.

Can tracking and true equality co-exist?

Tracking mechanisms are varied and complex, and can take place inside classrooms (small size ability-grouping), in specific subject areas (assigning students to different difficulty levels of the same course) or through different curriculum placements (college prep, business, or vocational programs). From the separation of little kids into grade school reading groups to the stratified ability-grouping of middle school years to the divergent curriculum paths of high schools, tracking is the dominant organizing principle of U.S. education.

Yet, while tracking is often taken for granted, it has never been self-evident that the best way to deal with differences among children and adolescents is to separate them into sharply distinct groups. The fact that students may benefit differently from the same educational experience is not by itself a compelling argument for segregation, particularly if such segregation has its own negative consequences and raises ethical questions about democracy and equality.

To be sure, benign motives have been offered for tracking by its supporters. Tracking is said to address individual student needs and problems and to match them with "appropriate" educational experiences. Educators have argued that slower students are intimidated and left behind if they face daily academic competition in class with their brighter peers. Schools also claim that tracking is done in the best interests of students who are not all suited for the same curriculum and to accommodate teachers who find it easier and more efficient to present instructional material to homogeneous classes.

But these largely euphemistic arguments turn a blind eye to the reality of what tracking actually produces inside schools. Abundant research and experience show conclusively that instead of matching students with more appropriate and effective educational programs, building student confidence and self-esteem, and improving student outcomes, tracking does precisely the opposite. It reproduces and magnifies society's class and racial inequities, while giving these inequalities the stamp of merit and legitimacy. Tracking restricts and actually depresses the educational achievement of the majority of students, who are placed in the lower tracks, and socially deforms and impoverishes the experience of all groups.

In other words, the effects of tracking are exactly what anyone even mildly cynical about rationales for promoting inequality might ordinarily expect them to be.

The Case Against Tracking

The overwhelming educational case against tracking has been most effectively presented by researcher Jeannie Oakes. In *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (1985) and other writings, Oakes shows how tracking hurts slower and average students academically and does not always benefit advanced ones. Tracking reinforces an unequal distribution of resources that leaves lower tracks with fewer academic course choices, fewer computers, less access to science labs, and more outdated textbooks and materials.

Tracking produces what Oakes calls a "clear pattern of instructional inequalities" which shapes daily classroom practice in devastating ways. High tracks get the most competent, enthusiastic teachers who focus on high-order concepts, processes and thinking skills, and who provide more varied activities and offer less harsh criticism to their students. Low tracks get less experienced teachers, lower order basics skills, more drill, more enforced classroom passivity, more hostility and conflict. High tracks are disproportionately white, wealthy, and college bound. Lower tracks are disproportionately black, brown, and poor. One summary of the research on tracking found that no matter what method of selection is used for track placement "even high achieving blacks tend to be placed in the low ability track, while even low achieving white middle class students tend to be placed in the higher track."

Tracking restricts and actually depresses the educational achievement of the majority of students, who are placed in the lower tracks, and socially deforms and impoverishes the experience of all groups.

Though tracking is most explicit in high schools, it begins most damagingly in elementary schools. Tracking decisions start early and are compounded in a spiraling sequence of cumulative decisions within individual classes, course offerings, grade levels, and entire schools. Numerous studies show that instead of constructively addressing gaps in student ability or achievement, tracking reinforces and widens the gaps between groups. As Oakes writes, "initial and relatively small aptitude differences among students, often due to social background differences, are exacerbated by ability-group placement...The process cycles throughout secondary school, with the differences among students growing dramatically wider."

Dangerous Decisions

Decisions made when a child is seven or eight can become lifetime determinants of social status. This isn't because small choices about what reading group or science activity a student should be in are necessarily made with destructive intent or malice. It's because such decisions set a child in motion through educational institutions structured to provide unequal educational experiences to different categories of kids.

Ability grouping starts as early as kindergarten, and students rarely switch to a different track after they reach 3rd grade.

Courts have ruled that schools must make tracking placements in the best interests of students, but there is virtually no due process surrounding such decisions and often no knowledge or noufication at all for the parents and even the students involved. Moreover, track placements are rigid and long-lasting. One survey found that "ability grouping starts as early as kindergarten, and students rarely switch to a different track after they reach 3rd grade." Where mobility between tracks exists, it is most often downward.

In most cases, placement in a low track is a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. It feeds a cycle of low expectations and crushes self-esteem. As one Selma high school student put it, "We don't call it tracking. Most people call it leveling and that's exactly what it does—it levels a student's spirit." One of the most unambiguous conclusions in educational research is that school and teacher expectations have profound effects on students. Studies show that even when randomly selected students are identified to their teachers as "gifted," they excel. Where students are stamped with a low-ability label, and treated accordingly, they learn less and drop out more frequently. Where expectations, and just as important, self-esteem, are raised, students improve and achieve more. "Grouping," says one study, "seems to sustain the differences on which it is based."

The obvious question is why do schools and educators, who profess to have learning and student progress as their goals, persist in tracking when it's been proven to be a destructive failure. The answer, too, is fairly obvious. Tracking has social, not educational purposes. As Oakes writes, "the dilemma is that well-intentioned, hard-working people appear locked into a school structure that is contradictory to the expressed goals of schooling...the persistence of tracking rests more on social and historical than on educational grounds...Certifying some for entrance into college and universities and preparing others with functional skills and acceptable workplace behaviors are what society expects from its schools. Even if practitioners were convinced of the educational value of 'detracking' schools, the tracked curriculum is well-suited to certifying students for different futures."

Eliminating Tracking

Inequality is a necessary condition of this society and a major function of schooling is to contain and manage this uncomfortable fact. Millions of students from less privileged racial and class backgrounds are routinely lumped into the lower ends of institutions that expect them to fail and are structured to help them do just that. Instead of helping parents and students make consciously informed choices about their own educational futures, schools are systematically—and for the most part tacitly— tracking many students to a lifetime of educational failure.

Eliminating tracking would not guarantee that every student would succeed at the highest academic levels, but it would eliminate unjust, artificial barriers to those who could. It would equalize opportunity. It would compensate brighter students for any loss of restricted, elite privilege by offering a more diverse, realistic, and democratic schooling experience. Studies of heterogeneous grouping, peer teaching, and other innovative educational practices suggest that advanced students can benefit from an untracked school environment without being held back academically. Ending tracking might also encourage many students and their parents to make positive choices to control their own educational careers rather than passively submitting to or internalizing the uninviting path laid out for them by the current bureaucracy.

As for the straw man of "lowering standards," opponents of tracking are not advocating uniform mediocrity or equal access to a watered-down curriculum. In fact giving low-tracked students passing grades for low achievement in return for social peace in the classroom is already an insidious form of "lowered standards" rampant in schools today, and one with racist implications. An end to tracking would reduce such enforced mediocrity and open possibilities for better performance across the board. It would also make for a more just school system. The decision to take a foreign language in elementary school or chemistry in high school should be made by those most affected, not enforced by misinformed institutional

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Tracking

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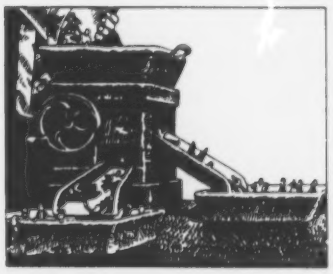
prejudice. Nor is there any valid reason why schools should cater to the premise that higher levels of skills and knowledge are reserved for an elite, while the majority should settle for less.

Tracking is a major contributor to the epidemic of negativity and alienation that schooling has generated. This is why the issue cuts so close to the bone and why struggles like the BEST campaign in Selma are potentially so important. BEST, the Best Education Support Team, is an organization of parents, students, and community people who have come together to confront tracking in Selma. While trying to tear down tracking barriers and remove major obstacles to quality education, BEST is also urging alienated youth to see their education in a very different context than ordinarily presented to them in school. It knows that students need the kind of individual and community self-esteem and sense of purpose generated by a broad movement for social justice. (This is one of the often overlooked lessons of the spectacularly successful literacy campaigns that have frequently followed victorious revolutions in many parts of the world.) Racist and bureaucratic barriers to educational opportunity must be removed, but as Jesse Jackson is fond of telling young audiences, "It doesn't matter if your textbook is good or bad, new or old, if you never open it." That's why BEST's struggle for quality education includes not only picket lines and protests against racist tracking, but also "Get Caught Studying" campaigns, summer "mind camps" and "21st Century Leadership Projects." It is not only a struggle against barriers of the past, it is a campaign to give youth positive reasons to take hold of the future.



The call to eliminate tracking recalls the demand for open admission to college raised in the sixties. In the face of admission practices that systematically blocked the access of minorities to higher education, the most direct remedy was to force the doors to educational institutions wide open. Certainly students who historically have received inadequate preparation may need specialized instruction or extra help. Optional or temporary programs for struggling students are justifiable and often necessary. But the current educational system has used a smokescreen of "appropriate instruction" to create a monstrous maze of tracking barriers to educational access that should be torn down. Campaigns like BEST's in Selma are beginning to show how it might be done.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Tracking: An Old Solution Creates New Problems

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For years, schools have assigned children to groups and classes on the basis of their estimate of the children's ability. Many elementary schools provide separate classes at each grade for high, average, and low achievers. In addition, high schools prescribe different sequences of classes, called tracks. Students heading for college and those expecting to take jobs right after high school will be in different tracks. Nearly all schools divide academic subjects (typically English, mathematics, science, and social studies) into separate classes for different ability levels. The vocational or general (noncollege) track usually coincides with the lower academic levels. College-bound students enroll in the high-ability tracks. Despite these commonalities, not all schools have the same tracking systems. Rather, schools vary in the number of tracked subjects, the number of track levels, and how they decide where to place students.

Schools also assign students to tracked classes for reasons other than ability. Often, schools place capable but bothersome, poorly behaved children in low tracks. Sometimes a student's hard work or insistent parent gains him admission to a high track. Particularly in secondary schools, the arranging of class schedules for hundreds of students also affects grouping practices. The mere act of developing the master schedule generates more tracking than most schools intend.

The regularities of keeping school running also affect tracking systems.

Administrators must make sure that each student has a class every hour. Each class must have approximately the same number of students. Additionally, each student must be placed in the correct class for his or her ability level. With all these constraints, even large schools can wind up with little flexibility for placing children. For example, instead of being able to place a student in any of five English classes, the school may have only one class in which to place a low-ability student. An average student may be able to take only one of two classes. Students identified as gifted, honors, remedial, English as a second language, and so on may have very limited choices.

Sometimes a class like health education also becomes tracked when students' other tracked classes keep them together for part of the day. For example, suppose students in the third-hour remedial-reading class move en masse to the fourth-hour social-studies class. Social studies thus becomes a low-track class despite the fact that the school does not have a tracking policy in social studies. We know of one drivers' education class that filled with gifted students in this way and became known as the advanced drivers' education class! Additionally, subjects like art and home economics often become low-track classes because students in the college-preparatory curriculum rarely have time to take them.

Assumptions about Tracking

Most people assume that children learn better if they learn with others who have similar capabilities. This assumption rests on the largely outmoded views of human ability that we described in chapters 2 and 3. The traditional view holds that children have dramatically different abilities that require different and separate schooling. The extreme position is that many students lack the intelligence to learn high-quality knowledge.

A second assumption is that less capable children suffer emotional and educational damage if they must learn with brighter classmates. Many expect that slower children in mixed-ability classrooms will develop poor self-concepts and attitudes toward learning.

Third, most schools, parents, and policymakers assume that tracking placements are accurate and fair. They assume that schools can and do make good judgments about which classes will most help children succeed.

Finally, most teachers and administrators contend that tracking makes teaching easier. Some believe that it is the *only* way to manage student differences.

ANSWERING THE ASSUMPTIONS

Children, of course, do differ in their backgrounds, developmental levels, interests, and learning styles. They also differ in the ease with which they succeed at typical school lessons. Not surprisingly, these differences influence what they learn at school. By the time students enter high school, differences in school achievement are considerable. However, the common practice of putting children from their earliest school years into separate classes to accommodate these differences is neither necessary nor very effective. In fact, serious social and educational consequences can result. A wealth of research has yet to find evidence to support any of the above assumptions.

The most serious obstacle to understanding tracking is that it is hard to imagine schools without it. Tracking is part of the school's culture. People take it for granted just like the school's other structural arrangements. For example, few question the organizing of instruction according to traditional subjects like history, English, and so on. Only rarely does anyone ask why schools group children in *grades* according to their *ages*. It is difficult to imagine schools without these structures. And it is just so with ability-grouped classes and tracking.

So, when we ask parents, educators, and policymakers to reconsider tracking, many jump to what we call *the worst possible case*. First, they anticipate that absolutely all differentiation among children will stop. They express concern that schools will teach all children in the exact same way and at the same time. We'd like to put some of these fears to rest. Sometimes children who are having particular difficulties (say, learning how to do long division) need to be grouped for a short time to receive special help. Sometimes those with similar interests should be grouped for a special activity or lesson. Moreover, we wouldn't recommend that schools teach calculus to all children regardless of their prior math experiences. We do not think that some children should wait to study calculus until all children are ready. And we do not suggest that the band director give every child who wants one a place in the school's jazz ensemble. And we would never suggest that children who need extra or special help should not receive it. In short, our arguments for more common school experiences do not deny that children are different and that they should have opportunities to learn differently in school.

Tracking Does Not Promote Achievement for Average and Lower-ability Children. And It May Not Benefit the Smartest Ones

Tracking doesn't work well for children in the low and middle groups. Benefits to children in the highest groups—when they occur—are often at the expense of students in the other tracks. Most children are not in top classes. So, most researchers conclude, most students do not benefit from tracking. For example, in the early 1980s about 62 percent of senior high school students were in average or below-average classes. As a group, these children experienced clear and consistent disadvantages from tracking. What's more, some studies suggest that students in high school vocational tracks don't even get better jobs as a result of their training. Shocking as it is, high school graduates who say they have taken vocational-preparation programs may actually be less employable than if they had not taken them. When they do find jobs, they are likely to earn lower wages than other, similar high school graduates. Some graduates of vocational programs do only about as well on the job market as high school dropouts.

Over the years of schooling, ability-grouped classes can exaggerate children's earlier developmental and motivational differences. Younger children who are initially fairly similar in background and skills become *increasingly* different in achievement when they are separated into classes for students with different abilities. Their hopes for the future also change in ways that are consistent with their track placement. This effect accumulates until high school, when wide differences among students are most obvious. One reason for this long-term effect is that track placements rarely change. Most students placed in low-ability groups in elementary school will continue in these tracks in middle school and junior high. Senior high schools usually place these students in non-college-prep tracks. In English and math, low-ability classes are often remedial. Remedial classes typically drill students on low-level skills while the achievement gap between them and their classmates continues to widen. Astonishingly, schools consistently and sincerely present this near-guarantee that children will fall farther behind as an opportunity for them to catch up.

Certainly, there are notable exceptions. Many teachers know of children who get inspired and catch on despite their labels and classroom placements. Some children, by sheer grit, pull themselves out of low-ability classes and succeed in higher classes. However, these cases are

exceptions. Furthermore, they may occur in spite of track placement, not because of it.

What's most surprising is that tracking does not necessarily promote achievement for high-ability children. That tracking *can* work well for the top students should be obvious. Certainly, it is possible to create excellent classes in the midst of mediocre ones. Start by providing better teachers, the most successful students, and, often, smaller class sizes. Add special resources, a sense of superior academic mission, perhaps a parent support group. With these advantages it is no wonder that these top students will get the best education in town.

What *if* the special advantages for the top 10–30% *resulted* in a poorer education for all the rest? Might tracking still be worth it? After all, these top students, some claim, need special grooming to be our future scientists, business executives, and government leaders. Evidence exists that top students do not necessarily learn less in mixed-ability classes. Many studies show that highly capable students do as well in mixed classes as in homogeneous groupings. Research on the cooperative learning strategies that we described in chapter 3 is adding to this evidence.

Ironically, being at the high end of the tracking scale is no longer a guarantee of most favored treatment. Often, senior high schools have two or even three tracks, marking some students for the better colleges and other students for the rest. A student may be in classes called college-prep (regular), accelerated, honors, or advanced placement. Each of these classes has its individual status. They are not equal in reputation, teacher quality, class size, resources, or expectations for excellence. Where these multiple classes exist, many colleges give preference to applicants from the higher classes. In many states, for example, an A grade earned in certain classes is worth more grade points for college than an A in a regular college-bound class.

Students who are already highly motivated can become quite competitive among a very small population of highest-achieving children. Those who are not in the *very* top sometimes feel like failures when they compare their status with that of the better students. Very few educators see this competition as helpful to the most capable students.

Tracking Does Not Help Slower Children Feel Better about Themselves

Slower children do not need to suffer emotional strains when enrolled in mixed-ability classes. Of course, some classrooms are rife with the destructive public comparisons we described in chapter 3. In those

classes all children who are not the highest achievers—and perhaps even they—risk humiliation. Children can also suffer emotionally from placement in classes for slow students. Being in a low track can foster poor self-concepts, lowered aspirations, and negative attitudes toward school. Some studies conclude that tracking leads low-track children to misbehave in school and eventually to drop out altogether.

Tracking May Not Be Fair and Accurate

Not all students will benefit equally from lessons. There is nothing particularly unfair about that. However, tracking *prejudges* how much children will benefit. The result is that some children do not have access to classes in which academically and socially valued subjects are taught. Nearly all children can learn from good literature. Nearly all can learn a second language. Nearly all can benefit from studying algebra. Some will learn more, some less. Tracking excludes many children from ever being in some classes. Furthermore, when schools err in their judgment, they are more likely to underestimate than to overestimate what children can accomplish.

Fairness is also an issue when we consider the well-established links between track placements and students' background characteristics. Poor and minority youngsters (principally black and Hispanic) are disproportionately placed in tracks for low-ability or non-college-bound students. Schools consistently overlook minority students for admission to programs for the gifted and talented. Blacks and Hispanics are more frequently enrolled in vocational programs that train for the lowest level occupations. Their vocational training is more likely to include building maintenance, commercial sewing, and institutional care. On the other hand, children from wealthier families enroll in higher-status vocational courses like accounting, computers, and business law. The political scientist Kenneth Meier and his colleagues have recently discovered that this track-based segregation is found especially in urban school districts that have desegregated their schools. Students in such schools are often resegregated by their enrollment in tracked classes.

Defenders of tracking claim that it is based on merit—that a child's school achievement, not his race and social class, directly determines his track placement. Some claim that students' own choices, will, character, and motivation determine track placements. In fact, low motivation, poor effort, and the like are at least partly the *result* of school experiences and tracking. The claim that a child has *earned* an inferior educational experience is unfair if his prior experiences place him at a disadvantage. Fi-

nally, if being in the low track prepared disadvantaged children for success in higher tracks, perhaps that initial placement might be fair. If the low track opened up future career or school opportunities, then we could justify it. In fact, neither happens.

Standardized test scores usually play a very important role in children's track placements. As we suggested in the previous chapter, schools that use these measures risk enormous unfairness. Individual differences in children—especially in young children—are subtle. Those differences that are easily determined through testing may not be the most important. But other influences also affect early and even senior high school track placements. Social indicators such as maturity and cooperativeness can influence track decisions. Physical development can affect personal appearance, height, and handwriting, and these in turn may influence teachers' judgments about a child's suitability for a particular track. A parent's interest or clout can also affect track placement. Illness, family trauma, or moving to a new school can throw children out of sync with the school's test.

However, while differences among children are sometimes subtle, differences among tracked classes are not. Sometimes slight and irrelevant student differences at the time of placement can have large consequences in the quality of education children receive.

Does Tracking Make Teaching Easier?

The assumption that tracking makes teaching easier pales in importance when we look at the abundant evidence of its general ineffectiveness. That its harm is greater for poor and minority students further weakens the ease-of-teaching argument. Even if we could ignore ethical concerns, tracking would make sense only if it gave teachers truly homogeneous (unmixed) groups. In fact, it doesn't.

Within tracks, children always display considerable differences in learning speed, learning style, interest, effort, and aptitude for various tasks. Often, tracking simply masks the essential problem of teaching any group of twenty to thirty-five people. Such instruction always requires, and should require, a wide variety of teaching strategies. Not all children will benefit from the same tasks, materials, and procedures, even if the school grouped them because of their similarities. Multiple criteria for success and rewards—the conditions we described in chapter 3—benefit all children, regardless of grouping practices. Unfortunately, tracking deflects attention from these instructional realities. When instruction fails, the problem is too often attributed to the child or perhaps to a wrong placement.

Tracking may make teaching easier for some teachers who prefer to teach as if their students were all alike. This does not mean that any group of children—high, average, or low—will benefit most from that instruction.

THE DIFFERENT CURRICULA IN DIFFERENT TRACKS

Access to Knowledge

Students in ability-grouped classes have access to very different types of knowledge. Track levels form boundaries around their opportunities to develop intellectual skills. We identified many of these differences in our earlier research on tracking and reported them in *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. We found that children in high-ability classes in secondary schools are more likely to study the topics and skills that colleges require. In junior and senior high school English classes, for example, high-ability students will probably study both classical and modern fiction. They will learn the characteristics of literary genres and analyze good narrative writing. They will write essays and reports based on library research. They will study vocabulary designed to boost their scores on college entrance exams. The high quality of their course content promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Low-ability children, on the other hand, rarely if ever get these types of knowledge. Their teachers do not expect them to learn the same skills. Prominent in low-ability English classes, for example, are xeroxed exercises, workbooks, and commercially produced basic skills kits. Students' reading may be limited to easy-to-read stories that do not require more than basic skills. Their learning tasks most often include memorizing or copying answers and taking quizzes. Critical thinking and problem solving, if they are emphasized at all, are presented in packaged programs; they do not emerge from a course full of valued knowledge. Low-ability classes are far from being "relevant" and practical, as they are often claimed to be. Because teachers usually teach basic topics and skills out of context, learning tasks are often more abstract and removed from the real world than in high-ability classes. Since low-ability classes omit so much important knowledge, students who spend even a brief time in such classes can miss the experiences they need to reenter and succeed in higher classes.

We can see similar patterns in secondary math, science, and social studies and in ability-grouped elementary classes. A far more restricted range of topics and less depth characterize remedial and average classes. Some of the most dramatic evidence comes from the highly publicized

Second International Math Study. The study found that American eighth and twelfth graders lag behind not only Japanese students but also students in most industrialized countries. In contrast to students in other countries, only those American students in top classes had access to many important math topics and skills. The limited exposure to math concepts set limits on the achievement of many more American children. In their book *The Underachieving Curriculum* Curtis McKnight and his colleagues reported that the American tracking system does not provide appropriate learning opportunities to students of different abilities. Rather, tracking restricts what students can achieve.

Opportunities to Learn

Two critical opportunities for learning are the time children spend in class and the teaching strategies. In both respects children in higher classes have better opportunities. They spend more time on learning activities and less time on discipline, socializing, and class routines. Teachers expect children in high classes to spend more time doing homework. They usually teach more enthusiastically, and they make their instruction clearer. They use strong criticism and ridicule less frequently than teachers of low-ability classes. Often they organize tasks better and give children a greater variety of learning activities. We're convinced that these differences in learning opportunities embody fundamental schooling inequities. Those children who need more time to learn appear to get less. Those who have the most difficulty learning have fewer of the best teachers.

Classroom Climate

Feeling comfortable and liked in class is more than just a nice addition to learning. When teachers and students feel successful and trust one another, they free up class time and energy for teaching and learning. In the absence of a friendly, trusting climate, students spend energy interfering with the teacher's agenda. The teachers spend time and energy trying to maintain control. Teachers of high-ability classes more often encourage children to become independent, questioning, and critical thinkers. In low-ability classes children perceive the teachers as less concerned and more punitive. Their teachers emphasize discipline, following directions, arriving on time, and sitting quietly.

Likewise, children in low-tracked classes often feel excluded from social activities and find their classmates unfriendly. Problems and arguing interrupt class more frequently. While students in higher classes are much

more involved in their classwork, students in low-ability classes seem apathetic. Being more likely to fail, it is much riskier for them to try hard and give the appearance that they care.

The quality of classes for average students usually falls somewhere between the high- and low-class extremes. *The Shopping Mall High School*, a revealing look at American high schools, reports on the experiences of average students. The authors, Powell, Ferrar, and Cohen, found a proliferation of classes and special programs for high-ability students and those with handicaps. By contrast, schools treated most students in the middle as unspecial and taught them in quite unspecial ways. In average classes, many teachers expected far less from students. They established set routines of lecture and worksheets. They held time and workload demands (both class and homework) to a minimum. Teachers accepted and sometimes even encouraged distractions. They rarely asked students to think deeply or critically.

These classroom differences suggest why students who are not in the top tracks may suffer because of their placements. We can't attribute the differences to mean-spirited or discriminatory teachers or to anyone else. Obviously, what teachers believe is possible influences what and how they teach. Average and low-ability students miss high-quality school opportunities because they and their teachers believe less is possible in average and low-ability classes.

Different tracks have characteristic classroom cultures. Like offices, factories, and other workplaces, classes develop a powerful consensus that sets standards for production. The highest tracks are most business-like. The lowest tracks can actually discourage anyone from being serious. In all classes, those who are out of step are in for a hard time. An office staff might shun a rate-buster, and a production team might apply pressure to a laggard. So children exert pressure on their classmates (and even on the teacher!) to conform to class norms. The track level may be the most significant information that children and teachers use to form their notions of how long and how hard students should work. This consensus is largely informal and builds over time. However, actors outside the classroom also support the consensus. The formal, written curriculum expects less. Expectations of parents and supervisors are lower. Children in other classes share the common meanings given to low ability, honors, and other tracks.

Of course, high-quality experiences are possible in classes at all track levels. Exemplary methods, skilled, dedicated, and even charismatic teachers, abundant resources, and a slew of other intangibles can combine

to make a silk purse out of the unlikeliest low-ability, sow's ear class. However, only the most extraordinary low-ability class matches in standards, learning opportunities, and class climate even ordinary high-track classes.

Magnet Schools

While not usually identified as tracking, magnet schools and programs may be the latest form of tracking. Magnet programs typically focus either on special interests or on special abilities, and they try to attract children from the entire district. Most magnets either occupy a separate building on a school campus or have their own campus. Some have their own teachers and materials and keep students for the entire day. Others share buildings and teachers with the regular program. Some students attend regular as well as magnet classes.

Most magnets select a particular subject-matter emphasis, but some combine subject matter with a style or value orientation. For example, a fundamental magnet program might focus heavily on teaching children basic skills and traditional curricula. It would teach American history rather than theme-based social studies. Fundamental programs typically avoid certain less traditional subjects like health or drama. They may have strict codes for dress and other behavior. Some magnets focus on the arts; the Performing Arts High School in New York is a famous example. Some emphasize science and mathematics, humanities, or a particular vocational area. New York's Aviation High is a well-known example of a vocational magnet school. Still other magnet programs provide alternative instructional methods such as "open schools," where children can participate in setting learning goals. Finally, some magnets are for students perceived to have superior intellect or talent: gifted, gifted and talented, highly gifted, and so on. Others are designed for low-achieving or alienated students. For example, the Peninsula Academies in the San Francisco Bay Area seek to keep potential dropouts in high school.

When magnet programs are selective—whether they target their programs for high achievers or for potential dropouts—they become another form of tracking. Like high-track classes and gifted programs, selective magnets for high achievers often offer extra resources, exceptional teachers, and highly motivated peers. Parents who choose these programs for their children usually express satisfaction with the quality of their education. Our major concerns rest with the children who are left behind. They may attend very ordinary schools with teachers and peers who are without a special status or mission. These ordinary schools make do with normal

funding, and in the end, they are places where most children receive their education. A contrasting concern arises when magnets limit their enrollment to potential dropouts or students identified as being "at risk." These schools may have all the problems associated with low tracks—they separate, stigmatize, and offer little access to high-status knowledge and skills.

THE HISTORY OF DIFFERENCES

A rich, intriguing history sheds light on why tracked schools make sense to nearly everyone. This history incorporates many of the features we looked at in previous chapters. Beliefs that form the social context for schools, testing practices, and the factory model of efficiency all support tracking premises. Also compatible with tracking are conventional grading practices and specialization of subjects. Finally, the nagging fear that there isn't enough really good education to go around fuels tracking. Most of all, this history clarifies the dominant belief that has guided schooling during this century. That belief is that we understand most about children when we look at their differences. Tracking is the primary way schools act on that belief to organize children and opportunities.

Turn-of-the-Century Problems

Conditions at the turn of the century continue to shape schools today. Immigration sharply increased and cities were in a shocking state of decline. Sharp social disruptions related to factory-based industry triggered social crises of major proportions. Then, as now, society turned to schools for salvation.

Parents, policymakers, and educators alike saw in schools a way to solve a whole array of problems. New immigrants needed to learn American ways. Schools were an avenue for upward mobility. Factories needed trained workers. Footloose urban youth required supervision. And schools needed to continue their traditional role of providing high-status knowledge to prepare some students for the professions.

After a long debate about how to educate children for such diverse purposes, educators settled on a newly coined view of democracy. They defined *opportunity* as the chance to prepare for largely predetermined and certainly different adult lives. Facing overwhelming challenges, schools chose solutions that were compatible with social beliefs about racial and ethnic differences. In time the solutions themselves perpetuated the problems their creators intended to solve.

Elwood Cubberly, a prominent educational scholar of the time, wrote, "Our city schools will soon be forced to give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal, and our society devoid of classes . . . and to begin a specialization of educational effort along many lines in an attempt to adapt the school to the needs of these many classes."[1] The superintendent of Boston schools tried hanging onto a few more democratic sentiments. In 1908 he expressed a view close to Cubberly's but not so different from what may be heard today: "Until very recently [the schools] have offered equal opportunity for all to receive *one kind* of education, but what will make them democratic is to provide opportunity for all to receive education as will fit them *equally well* for their particular life work."[2]

The Influence of Testing

Concurrently, two phenomena supported different schooling for different children. One, standardized tests, provided a seemingly scientific and meritocratic basis for the sorting process in schools. Standardized psychological testing, founded on principles of individual differences, helped to institutionalize beliefs about race and class differences in intellectual abilities. In some instances schools used testing to offer scientific confirmation that some children had clear learning limits. These children were largely poor, minority, and non-English-speaking. Early testing supported the view that some children's intellectual, moral, and even biological differences were vast and immutable. Many held a misguided view of social Darwinism—that era's "scientific" version of racial differences. They suggested that the darker-skinned, recently arrived immigrants from southern Europe were on a lower rung of the evolutionary ladder. Children of the native-born, northern European stock had evolved much further.

Intelligence-test pioneer Lewis Terman wrote, "Their dullness seems to be racial. . . . Children of this group should be segregated in special classes. . . . They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers."[3] While these views did not go uncontested, school tracking practices eventually corresponded to them. Schools adopted the

1. Elwood P. Cubberly, *Changing Conceptualizations of Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 15–16.

2. Boston Schools, *School Documents*, no. 7 (1908).

3. Lewis Terman, *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization* (New York: World Book, 1923), 28.

prevailing belief that inherent group differences explained the enormous variation in students' potential for school learning.

Scientific Management

The other development that seemed to make sense of treating children differently was the philosophy of "scientific management." As we described in Chapter 1, educators quickly embraced the methods of the expanding manufacturing sector of the economy. They used scientific management principles to devise well-rationalized methods for separating students. In the spirit of the age, this approach made wonderful sense to school managers and to boards of education. Valuing children's diversity for the contributions it could make to society made little sense.

As a result, educational managers brought into schools time-and-motion studies, centralization, authority concentrated at the top, rules for best methods, and so on. They touted these as the only ways to bring order and efficiency to schools' disarray. Following the model of the efficient factory, schools increasingly saw children as "raw materials" out of which they would fashion their "product"—productive adults. The apex of scientific management was manifest in the assembly line. One line might turn out Fords—to be sure, all running well and doing what Fords should do. Another line would turn out Lincolns—clearly a superior product. Managers did not value individual differences along the assembly line. Differences were defects in the product. So it has been with the school's scientific management ever since: individual differences within tracks often get labeled as flaws.

Today's Legacy

Today, too, many educators, parents, and policymakers link intellectual aptitude and prospects for success to race and class. They believe that these differences are profound and unchangeable. Fewer people blame biological differences than once did. However, many still look for racial/genetic differences to explain differences in children's performance. Today environment and culture are more popular and socially acceptable explanations. We must not deny the powerful effects of environment. Family, neighborhood, and school matter a lot when it comes to influencing which children are well equipped to start school. The question schools face is not whether children are different but how schools should respond to differences.

Schools' response, past and present, produces lower-track and vocational programs that are often detrimental to children. The lower the

track, the greater the disadvantage. Placement in low tracks begins a cycle of restricted opportunities, lower achievement, and greater differences between children in low and high tracks. These placements neither overcome academic deficiencies nor provide access to high-quality learning opportunities. Furthermore, the tradition is so strong that even in the suburbs, schools with largely homogeneous populations of white, middle-class children also subject children to needless differences in education quality.

In many schools, tracking poses a major impediment to improving the educational experiences of all children. Tracking can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that prevents schools from expecting success of everyone. It teaches children that if the school does not identify them as capable in earlier grades, they will not do well later. Few students or teachers can defy those expectations.

Tracking is the school's way of organizing children, and it reflects social beliefs, traditions, and values. As such it is too complex and entrenched to be abolished overnight. Individual teachers, schools, or even school districts are not empowered to change tracking without considerable effort, time, and disruption. Tracking will always seem to some people a necessary practice for sorting children. As we marshal data that discredits the *academic* consequences of tracking, we must remember that tracking developed for *social* considerations. The final arguments must be both academic and social. We must decide whether tracking suits children's learning needs, whether it conforms to our democratic values, and whether reasonable alternatives exist.

RESPONDING TO TRACKING

Recognize the Complexity

Tracking is changing from a hardly noticed to a deeply controversial schooling practice. Parents, educators, and policymakers are just starting to express dissatisfaction with tracking systems. Inevitably, they discover that changing the tracked nature of schools is no simple matter, regardless of how gradual a change they advocate. When someone raises the question, it quickly becomes political. There are few professionals or parents without strong opinions about it. Often, those interested in maintaining advantages for the children on top voice the most powerful opinions in support of tracking. Typically, advocates for minorities and the poor voice the strongest opposition. Parents of average students are less expressive. They may resent the school's seeing their children as having

almost-but-not-quite top potential. On the other hand, many such parents worry about what might happen if children in the lower tracks were placed with their own.

The same fears that desegregation raises complicate proposals for changing tracking in multiracial schools. Because race, class, assessed ability, and track placements are interrelated, heterogeneous (mixed) ability grouping may mean racial integration in classes where none existed before.

A serious consideration of "de-tracking" schools requires dramatically altered assumptions about nearly everything at school: students, learning, and the purposes of schooling. Tracking assumes that some students can't or won't learn. Successful mixed classes require the belief that all students can and will. Parents, educators, and policymakers rely on tracked classes to identify, label, sort, and certify children for roles in larger society. To create successful mixed-ability classes schools need to deemphasize sorting for the future and concentrate on giving the best education to all children.

The creation of constructive alternatives to tracking presents technical as well as political problems. Success for all students in some mixed classrooms should not lead parents, educators, or policymakers to believe that simply mixing up students and leaving everything else the same is the answer. Effective alternatives require fundamental changes in school organization and classroom practices. To do away with tracking, schools will require curriculum and teaching strategies quite different from typical school practice. There are no ready-made staff development packages or teaching formulas to help schools and teachers move smoothly toward less tracking.

However, we do have some clues. For example, Japanese schools appear to give children a better start toward high achievement than American schools. The Japanese, who are certainly no more egalitarian or fair-minded than Americans, do not routinely track students until late in their education. It is clear to them that separating children according to ability is not necessary for children to excel. Japanese children manage to do very well without gifted classes. They spend time in their early schooling learning the skills of working together in groups. The Japanese commonly divide children into small groups, each with its own student leadership. These groups have some responsibility to be sure that each child learns. Schoolwork is assigned to the group. And it is the success of the group, not the individual, that is most important.

Japanese schools have their problems too. In Japan, enormous pressure

is exerted on children to succeed in exams. Children with special needs or those whose skills bloom early or late can, as in our own country, fall through the cracks. And cultural conditions are very different from those in the United States. Fewer Japanese mothers work. Many make a career of serving their children's education. Our point is not that we should do schooling the Japanese way, but that the Japanese system illustrates a particular strength and possibility. In a highly competitive society that pressures children to excel, children with different abilities benefit from working and learning together.

Americans should look at how Japan and other nations use mixed-ability classes without sacrificing the most highly skilled children. However, they need to look even more carefully at the full picture of American schools and culture. Right now, tracked classes make sense because they reflect prevailing beliefs, values, and interpretations of experience. Genuinely successful approaches to untracking schools will be American ones. Local schools will embrace them and build their programs on a different set of beliefs, values, and assumptions.

Alternatives will be most effective if they begin early. Junior high may be too late, and first grade is not too early. Although difficult, such changes are compatible with current elementary schooling methods. Many elementary schools actively pursue the schooling principles we outlined in chapters 3, 4, and 5. However, those principles that are necessary to guide mixed classes clash head-on with the standard practices of high schools. There, grouping, teaching, and evaluation policies firmly adhere to the notions of sorting, standardization, and competition. Additionally, secondary educators are constrained by what students experience in earlier grades. Typically, low-track high school students have been in low-ability groups and remedial programs since elementary school. The gap between them and their more successful peers has grown wider each year. Not only does achievement differ dramatically, so do students' attitudes toward school and toward their own ability to succeed. By junior high track-related achievement and attitude limit tracking alternatives.

Nevertheless, that secondary schools face special problems does not imply there is nothing they can do about tracking. They can start gradual changes, even if they retain some tracking. For example, instead of being dead ends, low-track classes can become preparatory for higher-status classes. Schools can offer some college-prep courses over a two-year period for students who lack the necessary background. Instead of being used to repeat classes, summer school can give extra time to children who

didn't grasp all the important concepts. Schools can reduce the number of tracks in certain subjects. They could cut out tracks altogether in a few subjects or grades. Social studies class or the entire seventh grade is often a relatively easy place to begin. With a little more effort, other subjects and grades can be mixed.

Combined classes composed of students with more than one level of ability can be team-taught or multigraded to permit flexible subgroupings around specific skills. Counselors can recruit students for academic programs rather than use strict placement criteria for keeping them out. Slower students can be mainstreamed into regular or more advanced classes. After-school peer or adult tutoring can help children keep up with their classmates. School policymakers can establish criteria for racial and ethnic balance in classes at all levels. They can include special programs such as those for the gifted in their balancing requirements. Schools can blur the distinction between vocational and academic programs by infusing vocational curriculum with academic concepts and enriching academic classes with real-life, hands-on learning experiences.

Can school districts take advantage of some of the merits of magnet schools and the feature of allowing parents choices of schools without creating more tracking? One way of avoiding at least some of the problems would be for school districts to allow each child the choice of a school with a special focus and a special mission. Fortunately, many magnets do have open enrollment policies and select students by lottery or on a first-come, first-served basis. These schools, especially those that have attracted a diverse student body, can be very successful. Part of their success is explained by studies showing that children benefit when schools pursue their own local mission unhampered by rigid ties to the central office. Most magnets are given this latitude by their districts. Furthermore, theme-oriented, nonselective magnets may have the greatest chance to pursue a special mission without departing from the principles of a common education.

Obviously, the changes likely to promote high-quality learning for all students in heterogeneous classrooms go beyond fine-tuning current practice. They require fundamental changes in the structure of schooling and teachers' work. Finally, as with most major reform initiatives, teacher professionalism is central to successful tracking alternatives. Working with their communities, school staffs can design changes that are compatible with school goals and politically manageable. However, unless teachers can develop and experiment with fundamental changes in school

organization and classroom practices, little will change. Teachers will need a measure of professional autonomy before alternatives to tracking can be intelligently conceived or enthusiastically endorsed.

What's Best for Your Child and All Children?

Tracking is a problem for parents who are trying to negotiate the best education for their own children. Once informed about tracking's effects, most parents, like most educators, lament the consequences. Most understand the frustration of trying to offer high-quality lessons to children the school labels "low ability" or "slow." On the other hand, it surprises many to learn that average children are also at a disadvantage in a tracked school.

Parents and teachers worry about protecting the education of top students. Many find it hard to believe the research evidence that academically able students can continue to do well in mixed classes. Besides, the top tracks *do* offer educational and social advantages to students. Parents find it difficult to surrender these clear advantages for promises that their children would do "no worse" in mixed classes. Yet there is little comfort in such a system for most parents. After all, most children are not in the top track. Even white, suburban, high-achieving schools assign a large percentage of students to mediocre experiences in lower-ability classes.

Getting one's own child into a higher track or a highly selective magnet school is a far from adequate solution. High-track classes are no likelier to be multidimensional than low ones—although some magnet programs might be. Moreover, the competition may be intense and the opportunities for public comparisons great. With those cautions, our advice to parents is first to look for a nonselective magnet or heterogeneous program that features multidimensional classrooms and engages children in rich and complex knowledge. If those options are not available, you probably need to lobby the school to have your children placed in as high a track as they can handle. The high track is no guarantee of quality, but the odds are that it will be a better educational experience than a lower track.

What's best for your child in the long run? What's best for all the other children? We would hope that parents would engage their school boards, district administrators, principal, counselors, and teachers in discussions of tracking issues. Information-gathering questions are good for starters. How schools track is a matter of public policy and deep concern. Rules, procedures, and consequences should be explicit. How does the school make tracking decisions? How are teachers assigned? How many classes are tracked? How many children assigned to low tracks move into higher

ones? What is the distribution of track enrollments according to children's (and teachers') race and gender?

Whether and how these questions are answered will reveal much about a school's commitment to all its children. Even more telling is whether the school can follow these questions with a careful, open, and tolerant probing of assumptions and values. Such an inquiry is an arduous, courageous, and rarely attempted undertaking in education. However, we should expect to do no less if we intend to make schools humane, equitable, and truly educational places.

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MORE TRACKING RESOURCES

Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools, Robert Slavin. National Center for Effective Schools, Johns Hopkins University: Baltimore, MD, 1986.

Academic Tracking, National Education Association (NEA) Executive Committee, Subcommittee on Tracking. Contact NEA in your area or NEA, Instruction and Professional Development, 1201 16th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036. Phone: 202-822-7350.

Best Education Support Team, P.O. Box 1305, Selma, AL 36702. This group of parents and community activists fights for better schools and against tracking. They have won many battles and have much to share.

Center for Collaborative Education, 1573 Madison Ave., #412, New York, NY 10029. Phone: 212-348-7821. These parent and teacher activists have successfully "de-tracked" several public schools in New York City. They welcome visitors; write for details.

Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality, Jeannie Oakes. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1985.

Locked In/Locked Out: Tracking and Placement in Boston Public Schools, Emily Dentzer and Anne Wheelock. $10 from Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 95 Berkeley St., Boston, MA 02116 Phone: 617-357-8431. Not just for activists in Boston.

Making Inequality: The Hidden Curriculum of High School Tracking, James Rosenbaum. Wiley: New York, NY, 1979.

Massachusetts Advocacy Center (see Locked In, Locked Out, above) has fought for 30 years to improve education for all students. Their work on tracking is a practical model for parents and teachers elsewhere.

The New Improved Sorting Machine, Donald Moore and Suzanne Davenport. Designs for Change: 220 State, #1900, Chicago, IL 60604. Published in 1988.

Rethinking Schools frequently features articles on alternatives to tracking, local fights against tracking, and related issues. Single issues are $2.00, subscriptions $10.00. Write: 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212. Phone: 414-964-9646.

The Underachieving Curriculum, Curtis McKnight et al. Stipes: Champaign, Il, 1987.

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What Is Tracking?

Tracking is a way of sorting students. Sorting determines the kinds of skills, knowledge, and resources available to students. Although tracking is often known as ability grouping, it has very little to do with ability.

Rather, tracking is usually based on achievement as measured by standardized tests or estimates of a child's ability. Even when tracking is based on the judgement of teachers, students, and/or parents, it rarely accounts for differences in family education or circumstances, past school experiences, and other factors. It fails to fully consider each student's strengths, weaknesses, and potential.

The result is an education system that duplicates inequalities among races, classes, and sexes that continue to tear our society apart. The most vicious forms of tracking close off opportunities for certain students, most often the poor and children of color. These students end up spending years repeating mindless drills in English, math, and other so-called basic classes.

What are the most common tracking methods?

Teachers and parents sometimes believe tracking is beneficial because it seems to respect differences among students. However, in the long run tracking is harmful — once a child is in a low track it is almost impossible to get out. Every day children spend in the low track they lose ground to students in more advanced groups.

Every school tracks differently. This paper presents a list of the most common forms of tracking with the technical name and an explanation of how it works. Since these practices can be hard to spot and some schools will deny using them, the explanations are followed by a list of questions to help you decide if negative forms of tracking are being used.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

ABILITY GROUPING:

- **Within grade level.** Some schools deliberately — through the use of test scores — or through carelessness create tracked classes within grades. For instance, instead of mixing all children in three second grade classes, the better prepared students end up together.

If your child seems to be with the same children year after year, or if the classes seem to be segregated by race, neighborhood, or the parents' background, you may want to ask questions. (For ideas, see the list at the end of this sheet.)

- **Within classes.** Especially in reading and math, students may be divided into groups. Often the groups have names like tigers, panthers, and bluebirds instead of high, middle, or low. Materials are usually different for each group and while advanced groups get whole books, the lower groups may get work sheets.

ACTION:

If your child is in a lower-level group, insist that there be a plan and a target date for moving him or her into a higher level. Find out what you can do at home to help improve your child's skills and speed up the process.

Question tracking at PTA and other parent meetings. Even though you may be able to protect your child, others will be harmed if the practices continue. If you are able to convince other parents that tracking is harmful, work together to get your school or the entire system to adopt a plan to end tracking. Contact NCEA for organizing ideas.

PULL-OUT PROGRAMS

Many students are taken out of class for special help as part of Chapter 1, special education, or some other program. Students in pull-outs are often labeled in negative ways. If the program's benefits truly outweigh this risk, parents and teachers should try to make sure the students do not see pull-outs as negative.

Students should be evaluated before they are placed in pull-outs and clear, short-term goals should be set. At the end of an agreed-upon period, the program should be evaluated to see if the child's needs are being met and progress is being made.

ACTION:

Encourage the school to use Chapter 1 funds in such a way that extra help is provided in the classroom. Fight for lower class sizes so teachers have time to work with every student.

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

ABILITY GROUPING:

Tracking that began in elementary school is often continued in middle and high schools. Many schools use test scores and teacher recommendations to place students in classes or sections of classes.

Even if your school does not automatically group students by "ability," you may want to watch out for the following tracking methods:

- **Class names.** "General," "Developmental," "Basic," and "Beginning" in course titles often mean lower track. Other times a class will have sections A, B, and C with the letters standing for the level of difficulty. Section A may be the only one that prepares students to take later classes needed for college.

Some classes are known as "gatekeepers" or "prerequisites." They may be required before a student is permitted to take some other class. For instance, a student who wants to take geometry may need to take algebra first. Occasionally schools will offer certain gatekeepers only in the summer or will charge a fee; this is probably illegal and you should complain loudly.

- **Electives.** Once a student has signed up for required courses he or she can usually choose two or three more classes known as "electives." Sometimes students choose their own electives, other times they are advised by counselors.

Foreign languages, journalism, photography, music performance, and similar classes are more likely to encourage critical thinking and other higher-level skills than wood shop, basic/general music, or introductory art. The first group of classes are also more likely to be filled with enthusiastic students who may encourage others to raise their expectations.

ACTION:

See action item under "Steering" below.

STEERING:

Counselors or other school staff may discourage students from taking the most challenging courses. Sometimes they will say the student is not prepared or will not benefit from the class because they are not going to college.

ACTION:

If the school has a list or catalogue of classes, look it over with your child. Talk with your child about what he or she would like to take and what recommendations, if any, the school counselor has made.

Make sure your child is not being kept out of certain classes because of test scores or recommendations. If you are told he or she is not prepared for a certain class, find out how to get prepared. If necessary, especially if the course is a "gatekeeper," insist that the school provide extra help.

Demand that your child get a strong background in English and math; that means classes that prepare them for college even if they're not sure they want to go. Don't accept excuses about scheduling problems from school staff.

What does tracking look like?

You may not immediately recognize the practices described above or your school system may claim that it does not use tracking. However, if you answer "no" to any of the questions below, you may want to talk with other parents about your concerns and investigate further.

1. Do most classes have a racial and ethnic mix similar to the school as a whole? For instance, if the school is 2/3 black and 1/3 white, are most of the classes the same or are some 90 percent black and others 90 percent white?

2. Do most classes have roughly equal numbers of boys and girls?

3. Do students in most classes have backgrounds similar to those found in the school as a whole? For example, do there seem to be classes where most students' parents are professionals and others where most students come from poor or working class families?

4. Can you see that your children are progressing? Grades may not be the best indicator; notice whether children are reading and writing more or better, moving beyond basic math skills, expressing more complicated ideas, taking on more responsibility, developing skills or talents, and so on.

5. Do your children's teachers seem to know your children's weaknesses and strengths and have a plan for addressing them?

6. When you attend school programs or extra-curricular activities, do the participating students seem to reflect the racial, ethnic, and class mix found in the school as a whole?

7. If your school or school system has special programs or schools, do the students who are part of them seem to reflect the mix found in the school or system as a whole?

8. What kinds of homework do your children have? Ask questions if they:

- Have no homework
- Get many work sheet drills
- Are reading and answering questions on paragraphs instead of whole stories and books
- Have lots of multiple choice questions rather than thoughtful writing assignments.

For more information, or help in proposing tracking changes in your schools, contact NCEA, PO Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472 or call 914-658-8115.

"Maintaining Inequality: A Background Packet on Tracking and Ability Grouping," published by the National Coalition of Education Activists, P.O. Box 405, Rosendale, NY 12472

Tracking: Maintaining Inequality

Tracking duplicates inequalities of race, class, and sex that exist throughout our society. In doing so it undermines the most basic goal of public education: to help all students reach their potential and prepare them for life as citizens in a democracy.

Tracking assumes students come with fixed academic abilities that don't change. Most research, however, supports the idea that academic ability develops and is shaped by expectations and community standards.

Tracking does not raise students' or parents' expectations. It does not encourage effort. It is not designed to help students progress. Tracking does, however, pigeonhole students, without developing a plan for moving them forward.

Tracking results in labeling that also has negative effects. As many have observed, there is hardly anyone who isn't bright enough to understand they aren't considered very bright. For students in lower tracks, these labels become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tracking's advocates say grouping permits teachers to give more attention to individual students' needs, allowing "high" achievers to progress more quickly and "low" achievers to set and meet reasonable goals. However, most studies suggest that when tracked classes do provide more individual attention it is because classes are smaller and teachers are using a wider variety of strategies, not because the students are at similar "levels."

There is little proof that tracking benefits students. There is much evidence that students in higher tracks receive certain advantages that should be available to all students, including:

- Highly qualified, experienced teachers.
- Additional resources.
- Access to higher-level skills such as critical thinking, and more intensive writing assignments.
- Exposure to a wider variety of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning and lively discussions.
- Constructive, personal criticism as opposed to harsher correction in front of other students.
- Access to specialized knowledge such as higher mathematics and sciences.
- Active support from parent groups.

The result of providing these advantages to students who are, in many cases, white, middle class, and already privileged just widens gaps in achievement, knowledge, and skills. Tracking creates classes teachers don't want to teach and tends to segregate students based on race and class.

Where do we go from here?

Short-term, skill-specific grouping focused on reducing differences helps ensure that students can take advantage of the kinds of knowledge and skills that in tracked systems are only available at higher levels; there is a place for this kind of grouping.

Practices that label students, encourage low expectations, or restrict access to knowledge, resources, or skills should stop.

Ending tracking without making other changes will yield few results. Therefore, our recommendations are designed to be implemented over time and to create schools where all students are well-served, where diversity is seen as an opportunity rather than a liability, and students are not isolated or segregated, deliberately or otherwise, by race, class, language, past achievement, or other factors.

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Recognizing that effective ways to end tracking will vary from school to school, NCEA recommends that school systems take the following general steps:

- **Examine and publicize tracking practices in use.**
- **Encourage discussion about tracking** among students, parents, staff, administrators, and boards of education.
- **Develop a time line for phasing out tracking.**
- **Provide teachers with training** in strategies and techniques suited to working with mixed classes, for example, cooperative learning, functioning as a resource and conductor rather than a lecturer, active learning, team and peer teaching.
- **Develop alternatives to standardized tests** for evaluating and promoting students. In particular, test scores should not be compared across schools and younger children should receive developmental reports rather than grades.
- **Explore alternatives to non-promotion** such as multi-age grouping and competency-based curricula.
- **Create a school culture with high expectations for *all* students.** Specifically, ensure that all children acquire knowledge and skills needed to have a real choice between immediate employment, higher education, or some combination.
- **Develop a plan to reduce class sizes.**
- **Involve all members of the school community** — students, parents, support staff, and faculty, as well as administrators — in planning and making changes.
- **Rework curriculum to emphasize themes and ideas** rather than skills and sequences. Challenging, meaningful curriculum is more likely to motivate students to learn skills that will help them gain information, understand ideas, and solve problems.
- **Ensure that "basic skills" include reasoning and analysis, problem-solving, creative and critical thinking** — skills needed for full participation in a democracy.
- **Make sure all students have equal access** to knowledge and resources. In high schools, for instance, this might mean abolishing "basic" courses that do not qualify students for other classes or for college-level work.

(This does not necessarily mean eliminating honors sections. It does mean ensuring that all students, not just those in academic tracks, have the possibility of entering honors' programs.)

NCEA also recommends the following steps to limit the negative effects of tracking during the phase-out period:

- **Design courses or tutorials to help secondary students** move into higher tracks.
- **Regularly review the progress of all students in lower tracks** with the goal of moving them to another track for at least part of each day.
- **Provide extra support for students with a history of low achievement.**
- **Train counsellors to be aware of subtle and not-so-subtle tracking practices** and prepare them to help students move out of lower tracks.
- **Establish written criteria** and have a method of accountability, including an appeal process, for any tracking that is not immediately phased out.

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